

## ON THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MEANING OF THE MYTH OF METALS IN HESIOD AND PLATO

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### INTRODUCTION

It's not my aim here to argue against the view that Plato intended the *Republic* as partly to investigate civil politics, or against the conclusions of political philosophers who have studied it at that level. The *Republic* might indeed contain many valuable insights about political science. Nevertheless my own position is that (1) Plato's *main* interests in the work are not political, but psychological, moral, and religious; (2) read in this way it is a vast, magnificent, and sublime work, with much to offer humanity; and (3) while I would more praise than criticize the great interest that political philosophers have shown in the work, there ought to be even *more* study of it by modern psychologists and moral philosophers. The problem is that the *Republic* has come to be automatically understood in the public mind as a work on politics, and this misperception works against our receiving the work's more valuable moral, psychological and spiritual benefits.

The section of the *Republic* called the noble lie is of particular interest in this connection. If taken literally, Plato there seems to propose that governments should lie to citizens. Now it is one thing to observe that governments do, in fact, lie and issue propaganda. And it is another thing to maintain that propaganda may, at least in very special cases, have certain limited utilitarian advantages, or is, in any case, sometimes inevitable. It still another thing to believe that studying the noble lie in the *Republic* may give us insight into the nature of government falsehoods. But to propose that Plato *endorses* and *recommends* government lying is different from all these. That proposal I very much do wish to question, and for two reasons. First, because it portrays Plato as a 'utilitarian' who would subordinate truth to expediency; I believe this view is false, and, further, that it undermines our ability to understand Plato's sublime moral message. Second, it encourages government lying by draping it in the mantle of Plato. Therefore it is a matter of no small significance that we have a viable alternative to interpreting the noble lie section of the *Republic* literally — and that is to understand it in a psychological and allegorical way.

In any case, the goal here is to suggest possibilities — which further research may or may not verify — rather than to dogmatically assert certainty. The words of Sextus Empiricus apply: "Or if not this exactly, then perhaps something like it is true."

## THE NOBLE LIE

In Book 3 of Plato's *Republic* is a famous section sometimes called the *noble lie*. Here it appears Socrates is suggesting to his interlocutors that, in the most just city possible, rulers should lie to citizens to achieve certain noble, ends. Moreover the lie is, even by Socrates' admission, an outrageously implausible one.

This section has led many commentators to conclude that Plato himself condoned states lying to citizens. Some, following Leo Strauss, have seen this as Plato simply accepting the less than ideal realities of trying to manage an effective state. Others, like Karl Popper (1954), have seen it as grounds to denounce Plato as preferring totalitarianism over democracy.

Better attempts to reconcile the noble lie with a loftier view of Plato have been made by modern scholars like Schofield (2007) and Harte (2013). Nevertheless it must be admitted Plato hasn't given us much to work with here — not, that is, if we accept without question the received opinion that this section of the Plato is meant to be taken literally as a recommendation for civil governments.

Nobody, as far as I am aware, has challenged the view that Plato meant this section of the *Republic* to be taken literally. The alternative is to see if we can make sense of it if we approach the *Republic* mainly as a work on psychology and ethics, wherein the nature and just governance of the soul is explored via an elaborate analogy to a city.

This is, in fact, precisely the way in which Socrates introduces the discussion of a city in Book 1. First Socrates and his interlocutors are unable to answer the question *What is justice?* in the case of an individual. He then proposes to investigate justice in a city, under the assumption that there are basic structural analogies between the city and a human psyche or soul. Throughout the remainder of the work, Socrates continually draws back attention from the city they are talking about to the analogous implications for the soul. In fact, towards the end of Book 10, discussion about cities is dropped altogether. The concluding pages of the *Republic* emphasize the primacy of making one's own soul just.

We also have strong a priori reasons to expect that the soul, not the city, is Plato's main concern in the *Republic*. Plato, after all, is a moral and religious philosopher, not a political scientist. All his works are deeply concerned with the moral and religious salvation of the individual. It would seem strange for him to simply drop the urgent vocation of saving souls (which was also Socrates' explicit mission) to write a quirky treatise on politics. (While some might argue that two of Plato's other dialogues, *Statesman* and *Laws*, also show a political interest, that somewhat begs the question. The truth is that we can ask the same question concerning those dialogues that ask here: are they to be taken literally, or are they allegories for the inner politics and governance of the human soul?)

As I have elsewhere written extensively on this topic (see References; and also illuminating discussions by Waterfield, 1993, and Annas 1999) there is no need to repeat the general arguments for reading the *Republic* primarily as a psychological allegory.

Two proposals of Uebersax (2015), however, derived from principles of Bayesian evidence analysis, however, do bear repeating here: (1) that, all other things being equal, we should be prepared to ask the question "did Plato mean this literally or allegorically" for individual passages of the *Republic* on a case by case basis; and (2) that, all other things being equal, if a particular passage makes little or no sense literally, but is plausible (or even deeply meaningful) taken allegorically, then Plato probably did intend it to be read as allegory.

Here our attention is focused only on the noble lie, and how one might understand it in a psychological framework. If we can find a plausible psychological interpretation, then inasmuch as it is difficult — both conceptually and ethically — to understand it politically, then this supplies important evidence for supposing that the entire work is a psychological allegory and ought to receive considerably more study at that level. It also addresses accusations of Plato's alleged totalitarianism.

## The Lie

In *Republic* 3.414b, after a long discussion about the training of Guardians, Socrates somewhat abruptly returns to a topic he briefly introduced earlier (3.389b): that whereas overall the city must "prize truth most highly," rulers may lie if it benefits the state. He now proposes such an "opportune falsehood" or noble lie which rulers should persuade other citizens, and, if possible even themselves, to believe. The lie has two parts: one concerning *earthborn men*, and the other the *Myth of Metals*.

## Earthborn Men

This half of the lie holds that members of the city were not born and reared in the conventional way, but that they emerged fully grown from the earth. Plato here is reworking the story of Cadmus, a Phoenician prince who, according to legend, founded the Greek city of Thebes and populated it by sowing in the ground dragon teeth that grew into armed warriors. Against all common sense, the rulers will try to persuade everyone that their childhood memories are merely imagined, "as it were in a dream." The ostensible purpose of this part of the lie is to instill in all citizens a heightened sense of community:

Now as if their land were their mother and their nurse they ought to take thought for her and defend her against any attack and regard the other citizens as their brothers and children of the self-same earth. (*Rep.* 3.414e; **Note:** [Except where otherwise indicated, all excerpts are from Shorey's translation.](#))

## Myth of Metals

The second part of the lie is that, while all citizens have the common origin explained above, nevertheless some are of nobler composition than others. Their qualities are graded according to corresponding metals: gold, silver, bronze, and iron 'races':

"While all of you in the city are brothers," we will say in our tale, "yet God in fashioning

those of you who are fitted to hold rule mingled gold in their generation, for which reason they are the most precious—but in the helpers silver, and iron and brass in the farmers and other craftsmen." (*Rep.* 3.415a)

Yet, we are told, this is not a strict caste system, for, while the races will generally breed true, sometimes a parent of one metal may beget a child of another. Thus, a golden father might sire a silver son, a silver father a golden son, a golden or silver father a son of bronze or iron, or a bronze or iron father a son with unexpected gold or silver in his composition. Socrates then makes an important statement:

So that the first and chief injunction that the god lays upon the rulers is that of nothing else are they to be such careful guardians and so intently observant as of the intermixture of these metals in the souls of their offspring ... and if sons are born to them with an infusion of brass or iron they shall thrust them out among the artisans or the farmers. And again, if from these there is born a son with unexpected gold or silver in his composition they shall honour such and bid them go up higher." (*Ibid.* 3.415b-c)

Note that the purpose of this part of the noble lie is not to keep the lower classes in their places, but to emphasize the extreme importance — in fact a divine "first and chief injunction" — that rulers pay utmost care to discerning the mixture of metals in offspring. The fitness of rulers to rule is the great concern, and pedigree alone is neither proof nor disproof of this fitness.

The peril of having rulers with admixtures of less noble metals is revisited in Book 8, where it is pivotal in the process by which governments degrade. In the so-called *tyrant's progress*, regimes become progressively worse through stages of timocracy (rule by honor), oligarchy, democracy and finally tyranny, each transition begins with a corruption in the integrity of rulers and guardians. Plato begins this extensive section by considering how aristocracy gives way to timocracy. This he does in the speech of the Muses (8.545d–547c). This passage includes the enigmatic *nuptial number* (8.546b-d), which is said to give the optimal time for the breeding of new rulers; should rulers not attend to this number in arranging marriages, Socrates and the Muses warn:

Our young men will deteriorate in their culture; and the rulers selected from them will not approve themselves very efficient guardians for testing Hesiod's and our races of gold, silver, bronze and iron. And this intermixture of the iron with the silver and the bronze with the gold will engender unlikeness and an unharmonious unevenness, things that always beget war and enmity wherever they arise. 'Of this lineage, look you,' we must aver the dissension to be, wherever it occurs and always. (*Ibid.* 8.546e–8.547a)

Mixture of metals leads to enmity and conflict, because whereas the golden and silver principles prize virtue, the bronze and iron principles seek material gain. (*Ibid.* 8.547b).

Having now introduced and reviewed Plato's noble lie, our plan for proceeding is as follows. First we will examine Plato's source for the Myth of Metals, namely the Ages of Man myth in Hesiod's *Works and Days*. Next we will argue that Hesiod's myth is a psychological and moral allegory. Then, on that basis, we will further argue that Plato's appropriation (or, rather,

elaboration) of Hesiod's myth of metals has similar allegorical meaning, and will conclude with conjectures as to what Plato's psychological meaning is.

## HESIOD'S AGES OF MAN MYTH

Near the beginning of Hesiod's *Works and Days* (WD) he relates the Ages of Man myth (WD 107–201). According to Hesiod, the original men were a golden race. They obeyed and honored the gods, and lived a blessed life free from ills, enjoying the fruits of the earth with no toil, and dwelt in peace and harmony.

First of all the deathless gods who dwell on Olympus made a golden race of mortal men who lived in the time of Cronos when he was reigning in heaven. And they lived like gods without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief: miserable age rested not on them ; but with legs and arms never failing they made merry with feasting beyond the reach of all evils. When they died, it was as though they were overcome with sleep, and they had all good things ; for the fruitful earth unforced bare them fruit abundantly and without stint. They dwelt in ease and peace upon their lands with many good things, rich in flocks and loved by the blessed gods. (WD 112–120)

Over the course of times several successively baser races emerge: ones of silver, bronze, and iron (and an intervening, enigmatic race called 'heroes' which Plato omits).

The reason for the passing of the golden race is not made entirely clear. However the downfall of the next silver race, is stated explicitly:

they could not keep from sinning and from wronging one another, nor would they serve the immortals, nor sacrifice on the holy altars of the blessed ones as it is right for men to do wherever they dwell. (WD 135–138).

The succeeding bronze and iron races are presented as progressively more impious and unjust. According to Hesiod, the last and present stage of Man's descent is the iron age. In this fearsome time "men never rest from labour and sorrow," and the gods "lay sore trouble upon them." Children dishonour parents and bitter conflicts appear everywhere. Might is right; and one man sack another's city. Men ignore the gods as reverence ceases to be. In the final stages even shame and divine justice — personified as Aidos and Nemesis — forsake mankind, so that not even the threat of retribution dissuades sin, and "there will be no help against evil" as society deteriorates into complete chaos. Hesiod, however, does suggest that this period will not last forever, thereby at least hinting that the whole cycle may play out again, perhaps many times.

## Psychological Meaning of the Ages of Man Myth

While the Ages of Man has received attention by many modern scholars (e.g., Boys-Stones, 2010; Dillon, 1992; Van Noorden, 2010), psychological theories concerning the myth's meaning haven't been much pursued. We do have good reasons to suppose Hesiod's Ages of Man story is a psychological allegory for the moral and psychological fall of the individual. Many readers, especially those with a background in psychology or anthropology, will find this hypothesis so

plausible that a long argument is unnecessary. For such readers the reasoning is simply summarized in Table 1 to promote brevity. For those who may need more convincing, a detailed presentation of the argument and supporting evidence is supplied as an appendix to this article.

**Table 1**  
**Outline of Argument for Interpreting Hesiod's Ages of Man as a Psychological Allegory**

1. Myths generally serve psychological functions (Jung, 1959; Jung & Segal, 1998; Campbell, 1949)
2. Structurally similar myths have similar psychological functions.
3. The Ages of Man myth closely resembles the Garden of Eden myth.
4. The Garden of Eden myth is an allegory for the psychological/moral fall of an individual.
5. Therefore: the Ages of Man myth likewise serves as an allegory for individual psychological/moral fall.
6. Additional support: the Prometheus myth which precedes the Ages of Man in *Works and Days* is clearly a psychological allegory for individual fall, and the juxtaposition of these two myths is evidence of their common meaning.

As is explained in the appendix, the gist of Hesiod's myth, interpreted allegorically, is that human beings are happy, blessed, and in a state of grace insofar as they subordinate or align their egoistic will with certain natural forms of 'divine guidance'. Whether this guidance is from God, from human nature (a Higher Self or higher unconscious), or from the latter mediating the former is a question beyond the present scope. We can only say that, whatever the source, the ego is aware as a *phenomenological* reality that, if suitably humble, it may receive promptings in the form of holy, noble, virtuous and 'golden' intuitions and thoughts (*cf.* the *spiritual senses* of Origen). However, when the ego succumbs to *hubris* and seeks instead to follow its own devices, a series of progressively worse moral, intellectual and emotional stages characteristically ensue.

From all this we have reasonable grounds to believe that Hesiod's myth, like the Genesis one, is a psychological allegory that concern what, in terms of religious phenomenology, is experienced as a mental fall from grace, and what Plotinus would call a 'descent of the soul' (Enneads x.x; Fleet, 20xx).

## **PLATO'S MYTH OF METALS AS PSYCHOLOGICAL ALLEGORY**

To be written. Plan as follows:

1. Very briefly review argument in my other articles — that modern subego/subpersonality theory (Lester, Rowan, Sorokin, etc.) supplies an excellent theoretical framework for interpreting the city-soul analogy, and hence the psychological meaning of the *Republic*.
2. Mention that instead of subegos we could as easily consider in a more general way any thoughts (conscious and unconscious?) of varying virtue and baseness, and how we ought to manage these.

3. In that context, explain what Plato's elaboration of Hesiod's myth consists of. In brief, whereas Hesiod presents the different races as historically distinct, Plato allows them to co-exist simultaneously. One's personality at any given time consists of a mixture of subegos or subselves of varying degrees of moral and religious nobility/baseness.

4. Subegos may propagate new subegos (children)

5. Since having foolish, base, shameless etc. subegos rule the entire polity of the soul is perilous, we should be extremely careful about which subegos generate the next 'Guardians'.

6. We need to convince all subegos of the benefits for all in grooming new generations of gold and silver rulers.

7. Illustrate with an example from everyday life.

8. Close by emphasizing how this is a very practical insight into self-governance, but one difficult to gain except by means of Plato's remarkable city-soul allegory.

## APPENDIX

### **Argument for Interpreting Hesiod's Ages of Man Myth as a Psychological and Moral Allegory**

Our first premise is that Hesiod's myth in *Works and Days* 107–201 belongs to the Fall of Man *genre* of myths (Uebersax, 2014c) that is prevalent across cultures, and of which we have many instances. In the West we have one eminent example, namely the Garden of Eden myth.

As a second premise, we propose that since human beings are, by far, mostly the same across times and places, then myths serve the same or very similar purposes across cultures.

Third, we suppose that different myths that are structurally very similar have very similar purposes. In particular, all myths that concern the Fall of Man and share a common structure have basically the same meaning and purpose.

As the Garden of Eden myth in Genesis is a good example of this *genre* and has been the subject of much study and writing, it serves as an excellent standard for comparison. From the above we may plausibly conclude that interpretations which hold true for it are likely to apply for similar Fall of Man myths.

The Garden of Eden myth is widely accepted as a moral allegory. Few educated and scientifically minded people believe that the story is historically true or meant literally. The more prevalent and plausible view is that it symbolizes the fall from a 'state of grace' by moral error (primarily, pride) — and the psychological sequelae of this fall in the life of the individual. The published evidence to support this widespread cultural interpretation is so extensive that to collate it would be a prodigious and gratuitous exercise. The trope of falling into sin by 'eating the forbidden fruit' and expulsion from Paradise, is deeply engrained in our literary and general culture. It is a symbol everyone understands; its allegorical nature is taken for granted. And appropriately so: it conforms in every way with our common sense notions of how allegories work and with the basic and obvious problems human beings have with pride, temptation, moral error, and the consequences. We are only too aware of how seldom we live up to our potential — intellectual, moral, social, and emotional. This is virtually the same as to admit that we live in a chronically fallen state, and mostly because of our own errors. To the extent that we seek some kind of enduring happiness, or at least freedom from anxiety, suffering, and confusion, then, precisely because we are so often fallen, we need external assistance to help guide our moral life. In response to this need, human culture uses myths to transmit accumulated moral and psychological wisdom from previous to later generations. The Garden of Eden myth fits this need so well that it would be foolish, obtuse, or obstinate to deny its purpose as a moral allegory.

Next we examine the close structural similarity between Hesiod's Ages of Man and the Garden of Eden myth. As in Genesis, Hesiod describes humanity as at first living in a garden-like setting, without toil or illness, following the gods, and living happily. Then, as Man turns away from the gods, life becomes progressively more averse and conflict-ridden.



It might initially seem that Hesiod gives more detail about Man's fall than Genesis, describing successive golden, silver, bronze, and iron races. The expulsion of Adam and Even from Paradise, where outside they must toil, suffer and earn their food by the *sweat of the brow*, would seem to constitute only a single stage of descent. However Genesis proceeds to track further decline: from Adam and Eve to Cain and Abel, the Tower of Babel, and eventually the fully depraved state of humanity in the time of Noah. With the deluge a new start commences, and the cycle begins anew. [Note]

Note. The pattern of fall and restoration repeats throughout the Old Testament in the history of the Israelites: the age of patriarchs, bondage in Egypt, the exodus and wandering, the Promised Land, David and Solomon, captivity and return, and so on. Always we see the cycle of arrogance and apostasy, punishment, repentance and renewal.

Hesiod's myth is cyclical, too. Hesiod drops a hint that the present iron age is not the last word. A better age may yet occur, in which case the process may begin again. Cyclicity rather than a unidimensional fall is explicit in the India's close equivalent of Hesiod's myth, which relates successive *yugas* of Man (Woodard, 2007, pp. 148–9).

To interpret the Genesis stories from Adam and Eve to Noah and beyond as allegories for personal moral life is standard fare in the Judaeo-Christian tradition and Western culture generally. For example we have extensive psychological interpretations of this material by the Jewish Platonist Philo of Alexandria. His works strongly influenced patristic and later Christian interpretations, and hold up quite well today by even modern psychological standards.

We should therefore not be hesitant to similarly interpret Hesiod's Fall of Man myth as a psychological allegory for the moral fall of individuals. That Greek myths have psychological meanings is virtually taken for granted in many circles. Supporting arguments are found in the theories of such well-known and respected figures as Carl Jung (1959; Jung and Segal, 1998) and Joseph Campbell (1949). It's therefore puzzling why this view is often neglected by scholars working in other areas, including classics and mythology. (Some of this is no doubt attributable to the near-Herculean labor required to merely stay abreast of publications in one's own specialty field amidst massive proliferation of books and articles.)

Using the Garden of Eden myth as a guide, the psychological interpretation of Hesiod's Ages of Man seems straightforward. We can characterize it in a general way to say that once the human ego chooses to separate itself from what might be called divine guidance (guidance which confers on the interior life certain noble, virtuous, spiritual, and 'golden' qualities), a cascading series of increasingly worse psychological events occur, ending in a state of severe inner conflict and disunity. Wars and aggression in Hesiod's myth symbolize such conflicts. Further, there is negative feedback built into the decline: each stage brings with it further ego inflation and decreased humility, insuring a further step downward. The punishment of sin is sin.

The preceding makes a solid case for interpreting the Ages of Man myth as a psychological allegory. Bolstering evidence is found in the preceding section of *Works and Days*, i.e., the myth of Prometheus (*WD* 42–105). This relates how Prometheus stole fire and gave it to humankind against the wishes of Zeus. As punishment Zeus ordered Hephaestus to fashion a beautiful

woman to whom each god supplied some special attribute (hence her name, Pandora, or 'All endowed'), and had her sent as a present to Epimetheus, the brother of Prometheus. With Pandora came a box, which she unwisely opened, thereby releasing all the world's present troubles — but with Hope remaining.

Here is an even more clearly a psychological allegory. It can hardly be mistaken as presenting something literally or historically true. It would be simple-minded indeed, for example, to suppose that all human miseries could be contained in a box, or commenced when Pandora opened hers. We may gain some insight as to its meaning from the names: 'Prometheus' means forethought or thinking about the future, and 'Epimetheus' afterthought or thinking about the past. A plausible psychological interpretation of this myth would be something like as follows: in an innocent state of trust in providence and divinity, human beings are happy and well off, free from misery. Yet something in the human ego inclines it to *hubris* and it habitually tries to exceed its naturally ordained limits. This is the great sin of pride from which many more sins originate. Prometheus is like Lucifer, whose psychology is so well explored in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Our ego, in its unredeemed state is the prototype of Prometheus and Lucifer. Like the latter it is something magnificent, beautiful, and gloriously powerful. These attributes ought rightly to produce humility and gratitude; yet by their nature these very strengths invite inflation and pride. Further, like Pandora, there are elements of shamelessness and deceitfulness in the ego's nature. Hence the ego falls. The result is that it is punished by some other element in the *psyche* — a judgmental and wrathful aspect, symbolized by Zeus in the myth. The price it pays for abandoning a condition of humble guidance by a higher power, with an associated life of spontaneity and happiness, is to scheme and worry about the future and fret about the past. These are the sources of innumerable forms of psychological suffering and woe.

The story of Prometheus and Pandora is a psychological myth if ever there was one. Its placement immediately before the Ages of Man myth supports the view that the latter is also a psychological allegory, and with a similar or the same meaning. The Prometheus, Ages of Man, and Garden of Eden myths deliver a vital psychological message: they warn of the perils of *hubris*, and remind us that our most blessed, happy, and natural state is to harmonize, insofar as possible, our thoughts, wills, and lives with something higher and divine.

Overall, then, the evidence in favor of treating Hesiod's Ages of Man myth as a psychological allegory is very strong. This supports the view that Plato's appropriation and adaptation of it in the noble lie should also be understood in the sense of an allegory for the psychological and moral life of individuals.

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